

The role of relationships and social networks in the lives of street-connected children in northern Tanzania



This picture is taken from [BVES's](#) back to work project for street-connected children in DRC. Children often need help building trust with new employers (Finding 2). Source: Julien Harnels, [Flickr](#).

My PhD research is concerned with how relationships and social networks impact upon the lives of street-connected children in northern Tanzania. The funding received from the Paul Broome prize facilitated my second visit to northern Tanzania and the main data collection for my PhD thesis. During this second, six month long fieldtrip, I collected 25 group and individual interviews with 55 street-connected children, former street-connected adults, community members, practitioners and social workers. Using grounded theory methodology (GTM), I analysed the data concurrent to data collection to facilitate theoretical sampling - sampling individuals and asking questions that complement the data already collected. After analysing a third of the data, some initial findings have been developed. Although data analysis is still in process, this report will outline some of these initial findings to satisfy reporting requirements for the Paul Broome prize.

Finding 1: When faced with adversity, street-connected children decide to make their own way

The most obvious category that has emerged from data analysis thus far is street-connected children's strategy for dealing with adversity by making their own way in life. This category encompasses children's decision to leave home as well as the decisions they make about how to live on the street or leave the street. While some children may be more willing to take on responsibility for themselves than others, the act of making one's own way is not necessarily

linked to a child's 'rebellious' or 'adventurous' character, but may be more linked to their experience of rejection, stigmatisation and marginalisation both at home and on the street. Without sustained trusting, supportive and committed relationships, street-connected children may be left with no choices other than to make their own way.

"So sometimes you feel it is better to leave home avoiding to copy that kind of life that my father had and go hassling for life by myself." Interview one, respondent one. Street-connected youth. Male, 18.

Finding 2: Not being trusted by society limits street-connected children's options

Street-connected children are stigmatised by many in Tanzanian society as being disobedient, threatening or cursed. One of the factors that influences the way street-connected children are viewed by society relates to their age. Older children are feared more than younger children who may be tolerated and pitied. A particularly contentious relationship is between street-connected children and the police. Street-connected children and youth reported that they were regularly taken into police custody with no obvious charge other than loitering or sleeping in the wrong place. This is not to say that street-connected children do not commit crimes, some admitted theft as a necessary form of income. However, the brutal, frequent and apparently indiscriminate attention that street-connected children received from police was cited as one of the children and youth's main concerns. Older youth and young adults explained that a tendency for them to be viewed by society with suspicion made it very difficult for them to be trusted by potential employers. Their being regarded suspiciously is exacerbated by their disconnection from their family. The older youth explained that to get a job it is necessary to have a referee, such as a family member, but that finding someone who would trust them enough to recommend them to an employer was very difficult. Whereas some youth intentionally built a good reputation through their hard work, recognising the role of trust in securing opportunities.

"You can miss job because already you are known, any scrap collector is thief." Interview 7, respondent 7. Street-connected adult. Male, 22.

Finding 3: Age plays a role in how street-connected children and youth view their lives

In this part of Tanzania, many families expect that children will contribute to the household economy through paid and unpaid work. Arguably, in poorer and larger families, the burden on children to contribute is increased. Additionally, corporal punishment is accepted and used by many in Tanzanian society, at home and in school¹, and submissive obedience is valued highly. The younger children interviewed in this study talked about their experience of living on the street by referring to their daily routines. Younger children did not talk about a desire to leave the street or to go back to education. It is common for younger children to collect scrap metal, which is one of the more lucrative forms of street income. This meant that younger children, in

¹ UNICEF (2011) *Violence against children in Tanzania: Findings from a National Survey 2009*. Report published by UNICEF Tanzania, US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences and the United Republic of Tanzania. Available: http://www.unicef.org/media/files/VIOLENCE_AGAINST_CHILDREN_IN_TANZANIA_REPORT.pdf. [Accessed 12/11/2015]

comparison to their lives at home, were happy with their ability to earn for themselves on the street, citing this as a common reason for returning to the street after family reunification interventions. On the street, children are more able to be in control of their time and earnings while escaping potentially excessive responsibilities at home. However, older youth and young adults were more likely to focus on their future, and lament opportunities missed when they were younger. It would seem that when children are younger, street life provides more personal economic freedom than lives with families or in institutions, but as they age on the street and their options are reduced, hindsight makes some youth and young adults wish that they had invested more in building skills for the future.

“Tanzanians think the street children are the stubborn children from the home, they are people who don't want to hear anything from their parents, they don't want to listen anything, they are rude [...] they don't want to be punished.” Interview 12, respondent 1. Community member. Female, 26.

“Sometimes the relationship [with family] can be very bad actually, so that's why the child, the children decide to come to the street, either that they'll be free, nobody will ask anything, they can do their things. They feel very relaxed.” Interview 6. Social worker and former street-connected child. Male, 30.

After completing the analysis of my data I will return to Tanzania in 2016 to share my findings and seek feedback from the research participants. At the end of the PhD project, the findings will be used to inform StreetInvest's training for street workers who build relationships with street-connected children across the continent of Africa and in parts of India.